

LIFE IS UNCERTAIN, DEATH IS CERTAIN

By Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda

“ife is uncertain – Death is certain”. This is a well-known saying in Buddhism . Knowing fully well that death is certain and is the natural phenomenon that everyone has to face, we should not be afraid of death. Yet all of us fear death because we do not think of its inevitability. We like to cling to our life and body and develop too much craving and attachment.

A child comes into this world bringing joy and happiness unto all near and dear ones. Even the mother who had to bear extreme maternity pain is pleased and delighted. She feels that all the trouble and pain borne by her were worth it. However, by crying the child seems to suggest it has its share of suffering for coming into the world. The child grows into an adolescent and an adult, performing all sorts of good and bad deeds. He grows old

and finally bids farewell to this world leaving the kith and kin in deep sorrow. Such is the existence of a human being. People would try to escape from the clutches of death but no one is able to do so. At the moment of death, they have their minds hovering over their hoard of acquired wealth, unduly worrying about the dear children surrounding them, and last but not least, evincing concern over their own bodies, which, despite the care and attention, are worn out and exhausted. It wrenches the heart to separate from the body. It is unbearable though unavoidable. This is the way that most people take leave of the world - with moans and groans. The pangs of death are considered dreadful, an attitude fed by ignorance.

Fear of Death

Men are disturbed not by external things, but by beliefs and imaginations they form of their lives and things. Death, for example, is not by itself dreadful: the dread or terror exists only in our mind. Insistence upon the truth of suffering may seem horrible to the mind which is unable to face realities, but it helps to reduce or eliminate the dread or fear by knowing how to face death. Once life is launched, like a bullet it rushes to its destination – death. Realizing thus, we must bravely face that natural occurrence. To be considered free in life, we must be free from the fear of death. Remember what science teaches us about the process of dying? It is only a physiological erosion of the human body. We should

not delude ourselves with imagined or anticipated horrors – imaginations which never come to pass. As a famous physician Sir Williams Oslet puts it:- “In my wide clinical experience, most human beings die really without pain or fear.”

A veteran nurse once said: “It has always seemed to me a major tragedy that so many people go through life haunted by the fear of death – only to find when it comes that it's as natural as life itself. For few are afraid to die when they get to the very end. In all my experience only one seemed to feel any terror – a woman who had done her sister a wicked thing which it was too late to right.”

“Something strange and beautiful happens to men and women when they come to the end of the road. All fear, all horror disappears. I have often watched a look of happy wonder dawn in their eyes when they realize this is true. It is all part of the goodness of Nature.”

Attachment to life on earth creates the unnatural, fear of death. It creates strong anxiety in our life, resulting in the man who will never take risks even for what is right. He lives in abject terror that some illness or accident might snuff out the precious little life he cherishes. Realizing that death is inevitable, the one who loves life on earth would go into a devout prayer expressing the hope that his soul would survive in heaven. No man can be happy in such a tempest of fear and hope. Yet it is hard to despise or ignore these manifestations of the instinct for self-preservation. There is however a

method of overcoming this fear. Forget the concept of self; turn one's love to provide humanitarian service and to shower love on others. Being engrossed in service to others, you will soon release yourself of the heavy selfish attachments and hopes, pride and self-righteousness.

Illness and Death

Both illness and death are natural causes of events in our life and must be accepted with understanding. According to modern psychological theory, undue mental stress is caused by our refusal to face and accept life's realities. This stress, unless overcome or subdued, actually causes grave physical illness. Maintaining a sense of undue worry and despair over an illness will certainly make it worse. As for death, it must never be feared by those who are pure in heart and action. We are all nothing but combination of mind and matter and as such there is actually no individual self to die. The karmic survival of evil reaction arising from past evil deeds may linger with us on our rebirth thus causing us to shoulder the karmic sufferings in a new life. Such an eventuality can be obviated if we make every effort to acquire merit by leading a virtuous life and doing meritorious deeds wherever and whenever possible. By doing so we can face it bravely and realistically since in accordance with the teachings of Buddhism there is no 'saviour' upon whom to entrust our burdens in order to be relieved from the consequences of our wrong actions. We should

constantly remind ourselves of the Buddha's advice: "Be ye refuges and islands unto yourselves; labour on with diligence." Buddhists should not go into grief and deep mourning over the death of relatives and friends. There can be no halting of the wheel of circumstance. When a man dies, the karmic sequence of his conduct passes into a new being. Those left behind should bear their bereavement with calmness and understanding. Death is an inevitable process of this world. That is the one thing that is certain in this universe. Forests may be turned into cities and cities into sand dunes. Where mountains exist, a lake may be formed. Uncertainty exists everywhere but death is certain. All else is momentary. We had our forefathers and they in their turn had their own but where are they all now! They have passed away.

Let not the sophisticated assume that a pessimistic view of life is being presented here. This is the most realistic view of all the realisms. Why should we be unrealistic and blind our eyes to real fact? For does not death consume everything? It does. Let this not be forgotten. The role of death is to make every man aware of his destiny; that however high he may be placed, whatever aid in technology or medical science he may have, his end is all the same, either in a coffin or reduced to a handful of ashes. Should we then be in sack cloth to mourn the life which has turned into ashes? No, this is not the purpose of life, nor of death. The process of birth is a continuing process until we become perfect.

Man's Influence Persists

The Buddha said: "Man's body turns to dust, but his name or influence persists." The influence of a past life is sometimes more far-reaching, more potent than that held by the living body with certain limitations. We occasionally act on thoughts inspired by personalities whose mortal remains have turned to dust. In our accomplishments, such thoughts also play an important role. Every living person is deemed a composite of all his ancestors who have gone before him. In this sense, we may assume that the past heroes, great philosophers, sages, poets and musicians of every race are still with us. As we link ourselves to the past martyrs and thinkers, we are able to share their wise thoughts, their noble ideals and even their imperishable music of the ages. Even though their bodies are dead, their influence lives on. The body is nothing but an abstract generalisation for a constantly changing combination of chemical constituents. Man realizes that his life is but a drop in an ever flowing river and is happy to contribute his part to the great stream which is called life.

Man, not knowing the nature of his life, sink in the mud of this world. He weeps and wails and sometimes smiles just to weep again. But when he knows what his true nature is, he renounces all transient things and seeks the Eternal. Prior to achieving the Eternal he will have to face death again and again. Since death itself is unbearable, should man not try to overcome the continuous repeated births and deaths?

According to Buddhism, this is not the first and last life we have in this world. If you do good with confidence, you can have a better future life. On the other hand, if you feel that you do not want to be reborn again and again, you should work towards this end by making every effort to develop the mind by eradicating all mental impurities.

Buddhist Philosophy

The Noble saints who have attained the stage of highest perfection do not weep at the passing away of those dear and near to them as they have completely eradicated their human emotion. Ven Anuruddha, who was then an Arahant, did not weep at the passing away of the Buddha. However, Ven. Ananda, who was at that time only a *Sotapanna* or who has attained only the first stage of sainthood could not but express his deep sorrow. The weeping bhikkhu had to be reminded of the Buddha's view on situations of this nature, as follows:-

“Has not the Buddha told us, Ananda, that what is born, what comes to being, and what is put together, is subject to dissolution? That is the nature of all conditioned formations to arise and pass away – Having once arisen they must pass away – And when such formations cease completely, then comes the Peace Supreme.” These words describe the foundation on which the structure of Buddhist philosophy is built.

Cause of Sorrow

The cause of our grief and sorrow is Attachment (Tanha) in all its forms. If we want to transcend sorrow, we have to give up attachment – attachment not only to persons but also to possessions. This is the truth; this is the lesson that death signifies. Attachment provides us many things to satisfy our emotion and to lead a worldly life. But the same attachment becomes the cause of all our sorrows. Unless we learn this lesson, death can strike us and fill us with terror. The fact is beautifully illustrated by the Buddha, who said:- “Death will take away the man though he is attached to his children and his possessions, just as a great flood takes away a sleeping village.”

This saying implies that if the village had not been asleep but awake and alert, the havoc created by the flood would have been avoided.

Death is Universal

Let us now examine how the Buddha solved this problem for two persons who, through attachment, were both deeply grieved by death. One person was Kisagotami. Her only child died after being attacked by a serpent. She went to the Buddha carrying the dead child in her arms to ask for help. The Buddha asked her to bring a few mustard seeds from a family where no one had died. But she could not find such a family. Every house-hold was either in mourning or had mourned over a death at one time or other. Then she realized the bitter truth: death is universal. Death strikes all and spares none. Sorrow

is the heritage of everyone.

The other person whom the Buddha advised was Patacara. Her case was sadder. Within a short period she lost her two children, husband, brother, parents and all her possessions. Losing her senses, she ran naked and wild in the streets until she met the Buddha. The Buddha brought her back to sanity by explaining that death is to be expected as a natural phenomenon in all living beings.

“You have suffered from similar situations, not once, Patacara, but many times during your previous existence. For a long time you have suffered due to the deaths of father and mother, children and relatives. While you were thus suffering, you indeed shed more tears than there is water in the oceans.”

At the end of the talk, Patacara realized the uncertainty of life. Both Patacara and Kisagotami comprehended suffering and each learned through tragic experience. By deeply understanding the First Noble Truth of “suffering”, the other three Noble Truths were also understood. “Who so monks, comprehends suffering,” said the Buddha, “also comprehends the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering.”

The Five Aggregates

Death, as defined in Buddhist texts, is the dissolution of *Khandhas*. The *Khandhas* are the five aggregates of perception, sensation, mental formations, consciousness and corporeality or matter. The first four are mental

aggregates or *nama*, forming the unit of consciousness. The fifth, *rupa* is the material or physical aggregate. This psycho-physical combination is conventionally named an individual, person or ego. Therefore what exists are not individuals as such, but the two primary constituents of *nama* and *rupa* which are rare phenomena. We do not see the five aggregates as phenomena but as an entity because of our deluded minds, and our innate desire to treat these as a self in order to pander to our self-importance.

We will be able to see things as they truly are if we only have patience and the will to do so. If we would turn inwards to the recesses of our own minds and note with just that bare attention (*sati*), note objectively without projecting an ego into the process, and then cultivate this practice for a sufficient length of time, as laid down by the Buddha in the *Sati Pathana Sutta*, then we will see these five aggregates not as an entity but as a series of physical and mental processes. Then we will not mistake the superficial for the real. We will then see that these aggregates arise and disappear in rapid succession, never being the same for two consecutive moments, never static but always in a state of flux, never **being** but always **becoming**.

Rebirth

But the four mental aggregates, viz, consciousness and the three other groups of mental factors forming *Nama* or the unit of consciousness, go on uninterruptedly

arising and disappearing as before, but not in the same setting, because that setting is no more. They have to find immediately a fresh physical base as it were, with which to function – a fresh material layer appropriate and suitable for all the aggregates to function in harmony. The Kammic law of affinity does this work, and immediately a resetting of the aggregates takes place and we call this rebirth.

But it must be understood that in accordance with Buddhist belief, there is no transmigration of a soul or any substance from one body to another. According to Buddhist philosophy what really happens, is that the last *Javana* or active thought process of the dying man releases certain forces which vary in accordance with the purity of the five (*javana*) thought moments in that series. (Five, instead of the normal seven *javana* thought-moments). These forces are called *Kamma Vega* or Kammic energy which attracts itself to a material layer produced by parents in the mother's womb. The material aggregates in this germinal compound must possess such characteristics as are suitable for the reception of that particular type of Kammic energy. Attraction in this manner of various types of physical aggregates produced by parents occurs through the operation of death and gives a favourable rebirth to the dying man. An unwholesome thought gives an unfavourable rebirth.

A Bundle of Elements and Energies

In brief, the combination of the five aggregates is called

birth. Existence of these aggregates as a bundle is called life. Dissolution of these things is called death. And recombination of these aggregates is called rebirth. However, it is not easy for an ordinary man to understand how these so called aggregates recombine. Proper understanding of the nature of elements, mental and Kammic energies and cooperation of cosmic energies is important in this respect. To some, this simple and natural occurrence – death, means the mingling of the five elements with the same five elements and thereafter nothing remains. To some, it means transmigration of the soul from one body to another; and to others, it means indefinite suspension of the soul; in other words, waiting for the day of judgement. To Buddhists, death is nothing but the temporary end of this temporary phenomenon. It is not the complete annihilation of this so-called being.

Causes of Death

According to Buddhism, Death can occur in any one of these four ways.

1. It can be due to the exhaustion of the life span assigned to beings of that particular species. This type of death is called *Ayukkhaya*.
2. It can be due to the exhaustion of the Kammic energy that caused the birth of the deceased. This is called *Kamma-kkhaya*.
3. It can be due to the exhaustion of the above mentioned two causes simultaneously –

Ubhayakkhaya.

4. Lastly, it can be due to external circumstances, viz, accidents, untimely happenings – working of natural phenomena or a Kamma of a previous existence not referred to in (ii). This is called *Upacchedaka*.

There is an excellent analogy to explain these four types of death. It is the analogy of the oil lamp. The light in the oil lamp can be extinguished due to one of four causes:-

1. The wick in the lamp burns up. This is likened to death through the exhaustion of the life span.
2. The consumption of the oil in the lamp is likened to death through exhaustion of the Kammic energy.
3. The consumption of the oil in the lamp and the burning off of the wick at the same time – is likened to death occurring through the combination of causes described in (i) and (ii) occurring simultaneously.
4. The effect of external factors such as the wind blowing out the light – is likened to death caused through external factors.

Therefore, Kamma alone is not the cause of death. There are external causes also. In Anguttara Nikaya and elsewhere, the Buddha categorically states that Kamma does not explain all happenings.

Face Facts

How should one best face this unavoidable event? By being forewarned – by reflecting that death will, and must come sooner or later. This does not mean that Buddhists should view life with gloom. Death is real, and has to be faced – and Buddhism is a religion of reason that trains its followers to face facts, however unpleasant they may be. Guru Nanak said “The world is afraid of death, to me it brings bliss.” It clearly shows that great and noble people are not afraid of death but are prepared to accept it. Many great people have sacrificed their lives for the welfare and happiness of mankind. Their names are recorded in the history of the world in golden letters for posterity.

The late American, Saul Alinsky says “This single most important thing I’ve ever learned was that I’m going to die. For, once you accept your death, all of a sudden you are free to live. You no longer care except so far as your life can be used tactically – to promote a cause you believe in.” This is the way how great thinkers view the concept of death.

Death is Inevitable

It is rather paradoxical that although we so often see death taking a toll of lives, we seldom pause to reflect that we too can soon be similar victims of death. With our strong attachment to life, we are disinclined to carry with us the morbid thought, although a reality, that death is a certainty. We prefer to put this awful thought as far

away as possible – deluding ourselves that death is a far-away phenomenon, not to be worried about. We should be courageous enough to face facts. We must be prepared to face reality. Death is a factual happening. Death is a reality. If we appreciate such eventualities and equip ourselves with the realization that death is an inevitable event that has to be accepted as a normal occurrence and not as a dreaded event, we should be able to face it, when it eventually comes, with calmness, courage and confidence.

Our Duties and Responsibilities

With the knowledge that death will overtake us one day, we should decide, with the same calmness, courage and confidence, to discharge our duties and responsibilities towards our immediate dependents. We should not procrastinate. We should not leave things for tomorrow when they can be done today. We should make good use of time and spend our lives usefully. Our duties to our wives, husbands and children should be performed in due time. We should execute our last will and testament, without waiting for the last moment, so that we may not cause undue difficulties and problems due to our neglect. Death may call at any time – it is no respecter of time. We should be able to face the ultimate bravely and with equanimity.

Craving and Ignorance

Can death be overcome? The answer is – Yes! Death

exists because of birth. These are two links in the cycle of existence, better known by the name – *Paticca Samuppada*. Altogether there are twelve links in this cycle, some of which are *Klesas* or impurities. Some *Kammas* or actions give rise to *vipakas* or results (in this cycle-rebirth) and *vipakas* over and over again. This repetition of countless births is called *Samsara*. If this cycle of existence is to be stopped, it can be cut off only at the stage of impurities, viz: *Avijja* (Ignorance) and *Tanha* (Craving) – These are the roots in this cycle of births and have to be exterminated. Therefore, if we cut off Craving and Ignorance – birth is overcome, *Samsara* is transcended and Nibbana attained.

We should try to understand that everything in this universe is uncertain. Existence is only a vision or illusion. When we analyse everything either scientifically or philosophically, without selfish desire, in the end we find nothing but void. ■